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IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

October Term, 1976

No. 76-1018

THE FORT MOJAVE TRIBE, by and through its TRIBAL COUNCIL in Class Action on behalf of all members of said Tribe,
Petitioners,

v.

THE COUNTY OF SAN BERNARDINO, a political subdivision of the State of California,
Respondent.

BRIEF IN OPPOSITION TO THE PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

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BRIEF IN OPPOSITION TO THE PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

Respondent, County of San Bernardino, files this brief in opposition to the Fort Mojave Tribe's petition for writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit entered in this case on September 28, 1976.

OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the District Court (Appendix B of this Brief in Opposition to the Petition) is unreported. The opinion of the Court of Appeals (Appendix C of this Brief in Opposition to the Petition) is reported at 543 F.2d 1253 (1976).

JURISDICTION

Respondent concurs with Petitioners that the United States Supreme Court, under the provisions of 28 U.S.C.A. § 1254(1), has jurisdiction.

QUESTION PRESENTED

Respondent restates the issue presented as follows:

Can a California county, acting under state law, validly impose a possessory interest tax upon the non-Indian lessee of Indian trust land where the tribe is subject to the Indian Reorganization Act?

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS, STATUTES, ORDERS AND REGULATIONS INVOLVED

While a number of statutes will be referred to, the key statutes are the Wheeler - Howard Act, also referred to as the Indian Reorganization Act or IRA, 48 Stat. 984, 25 U.S.C. § § 461-79; and Public Law No. 280, 67 Stat. 589, as amended, 18 U.S.C. § 1162 and 28 U.S.C. § 1360. Appropriate excerpts are contained in Appendix A.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Generally Respondent agrees with the STATEMENT OF THE CASE as presented by the Petitioners except as to the allegations therein indicating that the tax in question was invalid, certain statements on p.5 of the Petition relating to County Taxation, and the fact that there is an absence of any comments relating to the potential burden on the County of San Bernardino taxpayers if projects of the magnitude considered are brought to fruition.

As to the last two exceptions, Respondent's comments are set forth below:

A. *County Taxation*

The possessory interest tax (Cal. Rev. and Tax Code Sections 104 and 107) is not a device for evading the legal

prohibition of taxes on Indians. The possessory interest tax was not devised for purpose of evasion. Cal. Rev. and Tax Code Section 107 defines a possessory interest as follows:

> " 'Possessory interests' means the following:
> (a) Possession of, claim to, or right to the possession of land or improvements, except when coupled with ownership of the land or improvements in the same person.
> (b) Taxable improvements on tax-exempt land."

Petitioners apparently would have this Court believe that the possessory interest tax was devised for the specific purpose of discriminating against the Indians by evading the legal prohibition against taxes on Indian lands, as witnessed by their statement on p.5 of the Petition:

> "The possessory interest tax is, put simply, a device for evading the legal prohibition of taxes on Indian lands."

The truth, as this Court well knows, is that the possessory interest tax does not apply solely to interests in Indian lands but applies to interests in any tax-exempt land. The following California cases illustrate this.

The operation by a concessionaire of a profit - making business on the tax-exempt publicly owned Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum was held subject to taxation. *Stadium Concessions, Inc. of California v. City of Los Angeles* (1976) 60 C.A.3d 215.

A six-year agreement which a corporation had with the county hospital district whereby the corporation provided television sets to hospital patients was held to be a taxable possessory interest and of sufficient duration in that the agreement was made binding on all successors and assignees, *Wells National Services Corp. v. Santa Clara County* (1976) 54 C.A.3d 579.

Possessory interest assessments which were made against employees of the U. S. Government living with their families in government dwellings on national forest lands within the

county were upheld in *U. S. v. Fresno County* (1975) 50 C.A.3d 633. The dwellings were found to serve an independent private purpose. A taxpayer who for the term of his twenty - year preferential assignment agreement had the exclusive right to use a maritime terminal was deemed to have a taxable possessory interest even though the taxpayer's use was restricted to loading and unloading of cargo vessels. *Sea-land Service, Inc. v. Alameda County* (1974) 36 C.A.3d 837.

In *El Tejon Cattle Co. v. County of San Diego,* (1966) 64 C.2d 428, the cattle company leased tax-exempt property for grazing purposes. The subject lease was for a period of five years with option for two additional five - year periods. It was held that the county assessor could validly assess the possessory interest created by the lease for a term which included the period of the option, or the period for which the company had "the right to use the lands". (64 C.2d at p.430)

In *American Airlines, Inc. et al v. County of Los Angeles* 65 C.A.3d 325 (1976), it was determined that the county's tax assessment was invalid since the plaintiff airlines had no possessory interest in leased premises following the expiration of the terms of their lease of the tax-exempt property. Unlike *El Tejon,* supra, the leases herein did not contain options to renew. The following language of the court, however, upholds the validity of assessments of the airline during the period of the lease.

> "Undeniably the leaseholds of the airlines are possessory interests in the tax-exempt property of defendant city and as such are properly taxable as real property. (65 C.A.3d at p.329)

Respondent respectfully submits that the foregoing cases clearly demonstrate that the possessory interest tax not only does not discriminate against Indians as lessors but, to the contrary, that if Petitioners' contention is sustained, Indians would be afforded a discriminatory preferential treatment not even accorded to the Federal, state, or local governmental entities.

In those cases where the possessory interest arises from a 99-year lease or its equivalent, it is true that the present value of such a lease and the fee simple value are substantially the same. Petitioners also state that the California Legislature has authorized the counties to impose such taxes without authorizing any particular level of taxation so that one county may tap leases lightly and another hit them hard. This statement must be clarified since Article XIII, Section 1, of the California Constitution does direct the county assessors that "All property is taxable and shall be assessed at the same percentage of value." Variations may exist, but barring errors in judgment, the variations result from the intrinsic value of the particular lands and variations in the length of the term of the lease.

B. *Potential County Burdens from Petitioners' Prospective Land Use*

Much of the thrust of the Petition on file herein has to do with the impoverished conditions of many members of the Fort Mojave Tribe. "The Tribe has 620 members of whom about half live on the reservation." (T. 107) It is a certainty that the officials of San Bernardino County are most sympathetic with the problems confronting the Fort Mojave Indians. As with many governmental official bodies, the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors is confronted with difficult problems involving Indians and non-Indians.

Nevertheless, it should be made clear that Article XIII, Section 1, of the California Constitution makes it mandatory that the counties tax *all* property not otherwise exempt. The pertinent language of that Constitutional section reads:

> "Unless otherwise provided by this Constitution or the laws of the United States:
>
> (a) All property is taxable and shall be assessed at the same percentage of fair market value . . ."

The Petition now before this Court generally portrays the Respondent, County of San Bernardino, as a negative force in

relation to the Indians' efforts to better their economic plight. However, such a characterization completely disregards the burdens on the Respondent which would result from the magnitude of the developments envisioned by the lessee of the Petitioners' land.

The large projects related by the lessee - developer were described in the Reporter's Transcript, as follows:

[T. p.80, 1.21]

Q. Now, what is planned generally, just in a general sense, for this 12,000 - acre tract?

A. It is a very large tract, and the proposed development is really two-pronged at the beginning. A portion of lands suitable for agriculture and is going to go into agriculture on a temporary basis. The ultimate development of this land calls for the creation, construction, and sale of an entire community oriented towards recreation.

Q. The Court may be acquainted with the town of Havasu City, which is upriver a bit from you; is that not correct?

A. South of their location.

Q. South?

A. Approximately 35 miles.

Q. How far?

A. 35 miles.

Q. Is what you contemplate more or less of a similar type?

A. More or less similar, yes.

[T. p.85, 1.16]

Q. Let me direct you, please, to the most spectacular development which I believe you contemplate, and that is that there is afoot, I take it, a nuclear power plant for the use of the City of Los Angeles or its power district that is called California Edison?

A. It is not the metropolitan water district of Los Angeles.

Q. Straighten me out.

A. They are currently under negotiation with the Southern California Edison Company private utility headquartered in Rosemead.

Q. Which is for the purpose of having a nuclear power plant upon the land which has been leased by you?

A. Negotiations with Southern California Edison are for the utility to purchase on a long - term contractual basis, fifty years, the 100 percent of the output of the facility.

Q. And the actual planning and discussion, I realize, involves many, but I think you told me a moment ago you are in the stage of perfectly serious planning and discussion with Bectile, the Great National Corporation, and with a builder of such plans, [sic] and with California Edison at the present time, is that correct?

A. That is true.

Q. Have you, realizing [sic] that in a matter so gigantic it may well not get to the site, the Atomic Energy Commission must be taken into account and so on, but first of all, what is the magnitude of this project going to be?

A. Southern California Edison wants to purchase, is willing to contractually purchase 100 percent of the output from two 1,000 megawatt plants.

Q. What does this come to in terms of dollars of investment? What are we looking at?

A. Estimated cost today to build a 1,000 megawatt plant is approximately $800 million.

Q. And it is actually contemplated that there may be two such plants that have to be built to meet the needs of Southern California Edison?

A. That is correct.

Q. Have you any preference yourself at least as to which of the states the plant will be located? Where would you prefer to see it go?

A. Well, obviously, the taxes involved on a plant of that magnitude would be a major decision as to where to locate it. In the final analysis, of course, it can only be located where the engineering feasibility studies dictate.

Relative to the nuclear power plants, the question logically arises as to whether the possessory interest tax would materially affect the utility. It seems most probable that the proper public utility rate - making body would consider such a tax in the computation of the rate and the ultimate user of the power would bear that tax burden.

So much for the magnitude of potential uses of Fort Mojave reservation land leased to the non-Indian developer.

In order to assess the impact of such uses it is necessary to look to the obligation of the Respondent, County of San Bernardino, to the Fort Mojave Indians living on the Reservation.

The obligation was set forth in the case of *Acosta v. County of San Diego* (1954) 126 C.A.2d 455 (at 456; 2 P.2d 92, as follows:

> "During the last 25 years a number of significant changes have taken place in the legal position of the American Indians which look to the continued lessening of the control by the United States over their activities. The argument that responsibility for reservation Indians rests exclusively on the federal government has been rejected by the courts. (*Harrison v. Laveen*, 67 Ariz. 337 [196 P.2d 456]; *Swift v. Leach*, 45 N.D. 437 [178 N.W. 437].) That reservation Indians are entitled to direct relief from either the state or county in which they reside was conceded in *State ex rel. Williams v. Kemp*, 106 Mont. 444 [78 P.2d 585]. The only issue there was which political body should bear the expense.

> [5] From the conclusion reached that Indians living on reservations in California are citizens and residents of this state, it must therefore follow that under section 1. Amendment XIV of the Constitution of the United States they are endowed with the rights, privileges and immunities equal to those enjoyed by all other citizens and residents of the state. (*Oyama v. State of California*, 332 U.S. 633 [68 S.Ct. 269, 92 L.Ed. 249]; *Takahashi v. Fish & Game Commission*, 334 U.S. 410 [68 S.Ct. 1138, 92 L.Ed. 1478]; *Peters v. Pauma School Dist. of San Diego County*, 91 Cal.App. 792 [267 P. 576].)

Without question such major projects as set forth above are bound to cause an influx of a considerable number of people who will be living on the Reservation, both during the construction phase and thereafter as workers and residents.

The County respectfully submits that it is clear that a significant additional burden will fall upon the County in providing those governmental services to which such workers and residents will be entitled despite being on Indian land.

REASONS FOR NOT GRANTING THE WRIT

[Respondent's reasons are in the same sequence as Petitioners']

1. In response to Petitioners' "Automaton Operation of the Law Theory," a recapitulation of the philosophy of the United States Supreme Court in respect to the immunity of federal lands and Indian lands was set forth as follows in the case of the *Mescalero Apache Tribe v. Franklin Jones, Commissioner of the Bureau of Revenue of the State of New Mexico, et al.* (1973) 411 U.S. 145 (150); 36 L.Ed.2d 115; 93 S.Ct. 1267:

> "We also reject the broad claim that the Indian Reorganization Act of 1935 rendered the Tribe's off - reservation ski resort a federal instrumentality constitutionally immune from state taxes of all sorts.

McCulloch v. Maryland, 4 Wheat. 316, 4 L.Ed. 579 (1819). The intergovernmental - immunity doctrine was once much in vogue in a variety of contexts, and with respect to Indian affairs, was consistently held to bar a state tax on the lessees of, or the product or income from, restricted lands of tribes or individual Indians. The theory was that a federal instrumentality was involved and that the tax would interfere with the Government's realizing the maximum return for its wards. This approach did not survive; its rise and decline in Indian affairs is described and reflected in Helvering v. Mountain Producers Corp., 303 U.S. 376, 58 S.Ct. 623, 82 L.Ed. 907 (1938); Oklahoma Tax Comm'n v. United States, 319 U.S. 598, 63 S.Ct. 1284, 87 L.Ed. 1612 (1943); and Oklahoma Tax Comm'n v. Texas Co., 336 U.S. 342, 69 S.Ct. 561, 93 L.Ed. 721 (1949), where the Court cut to the bone the proposition that restricted Indian lands and the proceeds from them were – as a matter of constitutional law – automatically exempt from state taxation. Rather, the Court held that Congress has the power "to immunize these lessees from the taxes we think the Constitution permits Oklahoma to impose in the absence of such action" and that "[t]he question whether immunity shall be extended in situations like these is essentially legislative in character." Oklahoma Tax Comm'n v. Texas Co., *supra*, at 365-366, 69 S.Ct., at 574. (Emphasis added.)

Footnote No. 9 on page 152 of the *Mescalero v. Jones* case (supra) is set forth below and it indicates that traditional tax immunities were retained by the Indian Reorganization Act, *but not extended:*

> "9. The predecessor bills to the Wheeler - Howard Act, H.R. 7902 and S. 2755 (respectively 78 Cong.Rec. 2437 and 2440), expressly provided that the chartered Indian Communities may act "as a Federal agency in the administration of Indian Affairs," and, correspondingly,

that the United States would not "be liable for any act done . . . by a chartered Indian community." Title I, § 4(i). 1934 House Hearings 3. The bills further provided that: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as rendering the property of any Indian community . . . subject to taxation by any State or subdivision thereof . . ." Tit. I, § 11. *Id.*, at 5. The memorandum of John Collier, which accompanied the bills, stated that "[a]s a Federal agency, the property of a chartered community is constitutionally exempt from State taxation . . ." *Id.*, at 25. These extensive provisions for tax immunity were discarded in the Wheeler - Howard Act along with the accompanying provisions for more extensive governmental powers on the part of the chartered communities. See H.R.Rep. No. 1804, *supra*, at 6. We do not read this legislative history, however, as suggesting that Congress intended to remove the traditional tax immunity that Indian tribes enjoyed on their reservations. This reading finds support in Felix S. Cohen's treatise, see Federal Indian Law 852-853, although we believe that the broader thrust of his statement – that any "attempt by a State to impose income or other types of taxes" upon "tribal corporations organized under the Indian Reorganization Act . . . would still be held a direct burden on a Federal instrumentality" – is not supported by the modern cases and should be read with and in the light of other discussions of the immunity doctrine in particularized contexts. See *id.*, at 872-873, 864-873.

On page 7 of the Petition, the following statement is made:

> "This case represents the automaton operation of the law, a kind of machine - like inexorability. The trouble is that those are people in there, getting ground up by the machine." (Emphasis added)

The following remarks are not meant to cast doubt on the sincerity of that statement. But it must be pointed out that

there are many people, not living on an Indian reservation, who have to pay property taxes on a humble home which they own, or indirectly pay for such taxes when they pay their rent. These people are also worthy of consideration by the Courts, and there is little doubt but that the Courts have been, and are now aware of the "people" on each side of the equation.

The Petition also includes the following statement:

> "This, respectfully, is mindless conformity. A decision that the United States government will, in effect, reimburse the states for permitting large defense industries to be developed on government land is fundamentally different from enriching a California county by dipping into the pockets of the most poverty stricken people in America as they seek to utilize the small remnant of land which the government has left them."

In response to that statement, another portion of this brief sets forth the additional burdens which must be borne by the taxpayers of San Bernardino County if the large projects envisioned by Petitioners' lessee are successfully completed.

An excerpt from the case of the *Mescalero Apache Tribe, Petitioner, v. Franklin Jones, Commissioner of the Bureau of Revenue of the State of New Mexico, et al.* (1973) 411 U.S. 145 (152); 36 L.Ed.2d 115; 93 S.Ct. 1467, is set forth below:

> [6] "The intent and purpose of the Reorganization Act was "to rehabilitate the Indian's economic life and to give him a chance to develop the initiative destroyed by a century of oppression and paternalism." H.R.Rep. No. 1804, 73d Cong., 2d Sess., 6 (1934). See also S.Rep. No. 1080, 73d Cong. 2d Sess., 1 (1934). As Senator Wheeler, on the floor, put it:
>
> > "This bill . . . seeks to get away from the bureaucratic control of the Indian Department, and it seeks further to give the Indians the control of their own affairs and of their own property; to put it in the hands either of an Indian council or in the hands of a corporation to be organized by the Indians." 78 Cong. Rec. 11125.

"Representative Howard explained that:

> "The program of self-support and of business and civic experience in the management of their own affairs, combined with the program of education will permit increasing numbers of Indians to enter the white world on a footing of equal competition." *Id.*, at 11732.[8] (Emphasis added)

The question arises in view of the "equal competition" goal as to whether the purpose of the Indian Reorganization Act would be properly served if the Petitioners were to be given a competitive edge by means of a judicial extension of an exemption which Congress has not expressly given.

On page 8 of the Petition, Petitioners make the following statement:

> "In *Agua Caliente*, the majority of the Court of Appeals treated as if it were a defense contractor an Indian tribe attempting to make something out of its land by leasing, the only means available to it, and upheld the tax on the authority of *United States v. Detroit*. The Court of Appeals further made analogy to *Oklahoma Tax Commission v. Texas Co.*, 336 U.S. 342, 69 S.Ct. 561, 93 L.Ed.2d 721 (1949), where a per barrel tax on oil extraction by lessees of Indian lands was upheld. The oil extracted belonged entirely to the oil company, and the tax was simply a kind of gross income tax on extractions, expressly noted by the Court to be minor in its consequences. From this the law moves with the routinized litany that whenever a white man leases land from an Indian on an Indian reservation, the state is perfectly free to tax the lease."

Respondent respectfully suggests that Petitioners have clearly misstated the case. The majority of the Court of Appeals did not in that case treat the Indian tribe as if it were a defense

contractor. On the contrary, it specifically equated the position of the Indian tribe to that of the United States itself, and equated the position of the lessee from the tribe to that of the defense contractor. Indeed, those equations formed the very basis upon which that Court of Appeals properly concluded that the possessory interest tax challenged therein was valid.

The Circuit Court of Appeals in the present case addressed this exact problem in footnote 2, found in its opinion on page 1255, as follows:

> 2/ "The economic, as opposed to the legal, incidence of the tax sought to be imposed in this case is uncertain. Under certain assumptions with respect to the demand for the goods and services of the lessee the tax in question will fall entirely on the consumers of these goods and services. Under other assumptions with respect to such demand and with respect to the supply and demand for leasehold instrests similar to that here being taxed, the tax in question will fall entirely on the lessee. Other assumptions with respect to these matters will place the burden on the Indians. Which assumptions correspond to the fact is unknown and probably not knowable. In this case, we proceed on the assumption that it is possible for the economic burden of the tax, in whole or in part, to fall on the Indians. We know not whether it is probable that it will do so.

2. Petitioners' "pre-emption" argument stems from its interpretation of the following statute, 25 U.S.C.A. 476. That statute reads as follows:

> "In addition to all powers vested in any Indian tribe or tribal council by existing law, the constitution adopted by said tribe shall also vest in such tribe or its tribal council the following rights and powers: To employ legal counsel, the choice of counsel and fixing of fees to be subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Interior; *to prevent the sale, disposition, lease, or encumbrance of tribal lands, interests in lands, or other tribal assets* without the consent of the tribe; and to negotiate with the Federal, State, and local Governments. The Secretary of the Interior shall advise such tribe or its tribal council of all appropriation estimates or Federal projects for the benefit of the tribe prior to the submission of such estimates to the Bureau of the Budget and the Congress." [Emphasis added.]

Petitioners, before the Circuit Court of Appeals, contended the phrase italicized above should be interpreted as follows with an implied word in brackets:

> ". . . to prevent the sale, disposition, lease, or encumbrance of tribal lands, interests in [tribal] lands, or other tribal assets . . ."

Respondent is of the opinion that such interpretation is not supported by logic or reason, and that the correct interpretation is as follows, with the implied word included in brackets:

> ". . . to prevent the sale, disposition, lease, or encumbrance of tribal lands, [tribal] interests in lands, or other tribal assets . . ."

It is respectfully urged that Respondent's interpretation is adequately supported for the following reasons:

a. Grammatically, the words "tribal lands" and "other tribal assets" before and after "interests in lands" clearly imply that the "interests" referred to are "tribal interests" and not the interests of third parties.

b. Statutorily, the words "interest in lands" are used in a preceding section of the Indian Reorganization Act in the sense proposed by the Respondent, to wit, the first paragraph of 25 U.S.C.A. Section 465, as follows:

> "The Secretary of the Interior is hereby authorized, in his discretion, to acquire, through purchase,

relinquishment, gift, exchange, or assignment, *any interest in lands*, water rights, or surface rights to lands, within or without existing reservations, including trust or otherwise restricted allotments, whether the allottee be living or deceased, *for the purpose of providing land for the Indians.*" [Emphasis added.]

c. Historically, the Indian Reorganization Act was passed on June 18, 1934, which was prior to the penetrating and pervading awareness of "possessory interests in Indian land" generated by the 1949 case of *Oklahoma Tax Commission v. Texas Co.*, 336 U.S. 342 and the 1958 case of *U.S. v. City of Detroit*, 355 U.S. 466, and it is most improbable that in passing the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 that Congress anticipated "possessory interest tax" cases and therefore Congress was most likely not concerned with that area of controversy.

It is the contention of Respondent that the Petitioners' interpretation given to statute 25 U.S.C.A. 476 is incorrect, and therefore the contention as to pre-emption because of that statute is not supported.

3. Petitioners concede that they cannot assert an express conflict of decisions but that they can assert a policy conflict. As to three of the cases cited, *Chief Seattle Properties, Inc., v. Kitsap County*, (1976) 86 Wash. 2d 7, 541 P.2d 699; *G. M. Shupe, Inc. v. Bureau of Revenue*, (1976) 89 N.M. 265, 550 P.2d 277; and *Eastern Navajo Industries, Inc. v. Bureau of Revenue*, (1976) 89 N.M. 369, 552 P.2d 805, these are state court cases and do not take precedence over the following statement from *Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians v. County of Riverside*, (1972) 442 F.2d 1184 (9th Cir. 1971), *cert. denied*, 405 U.S. 933; 92 S.Ct. 930; 30 L.Ed. 2d 809:

"A substantial amount of evidence was received bearing upon the economic effects of the tax upon the

Indian. We conclude from it what we would conclude without it, that it, a lessee can afford to pay more rent if he is not required to pay a possessory interest tax. If an Indian's land is not subject to that tax he enjoys a better bargaining position than he otherwise would, and hence that the tax has an adverse economic effect upon him.

"States may not without the consent of Congress tax the property of the United States,[9] nor may they tax instrumentalities of the United States.[10]

"If the Indian as a beneficial owner of the land, the legal title to which is in the United States, is entitled to no more protection than the United States itself would enjoy, absent a congressional action forbidding the tax, then it is clear that the tax here imposed is valid. In *United States v. City of Detroit, supra*, (fn. 9) it was held that a tax similar to the California Possessory Interest Tax could be levied upon a lessee holding land under a lease from the federal government even though the burden of the tax fell directly upon the United States. If it was not clear before, it is clear since *United States v. City of Detroit, supra*, that "the imposition of an increased financial burden on the Government does not, by itself, vitiate a state tax" and that the tax imposed upon the use of property is something distinct from a tax imposed upon the property itself. We conclude from this that the tax here is properly imposed unless it can be said that the legislation dealing with Indians and Indian lands demonstrates a congressional purpose to forbid the imposition of it.

"Here, as in *United States v. City of Detroit, supra*, there is no statute which expressly forbids the imposition of a state use tax.

As to the fourth case, *Santa Rosa Band v. Kings County*, (9th Cir. 1975), 532 F.2d 655, *cert. denied*, Jan. 10, 1977, that case held that a local zoning regulation of the Indian land was an encumbrance under 28 U.S.C.A. 1360(b) which reads as follows:

28 U.S.C. § 1360(b):

> "Nothing in this section shall authorize the alienation, encumbrance, or taxation of any real or personal property, including water rights, belonging to any Indian or any Indian tribe, band, or community that is held in trust by the United States or is subject to a restriction against alienation imposed by the United States; or shall authorize regulation of the use of such property in a manner inconsistent with any Federal treaty, agreement, or statute or with any regulation made pursuant thereto; or shall confer jurisdiction upon the State to adjudicate, in probate proceedings or otherwise, the ownership or right to possession of such property or any interest therein."

As to a possessory interest tax in the *Agua Caliente* case, supra, the court said at p.1187:

> "If, as was said in *United States v. City of Detroit*, supra, a tax upon the use of property is not a tax upon the property itself, then there is nothing in these statutes [73 Stat. 602 and 28 U.S.C.A. Section 1360(b)], which expressly forbids the tax here imposed."

In so far as federal law is concerned there does not appear to be an inconsistency in policy relative to the taxation of a possessory interest. The different treatment of a local zoning regulation and the taxation of a possessory interest is justified by the statutory language and by the fact that an extra burden on county service is present when large projects are undertaken by non-Indians on Indian land, whereas the invalidation of a zoning regulation doesn't create a significant hardship to a county.

On page 13 of the Petition is the following statement:

> "Let us put the matter with the most unvarnished simplicity. As *Agua Caliente* and this record make clear, the Indians will find it difficult to lease their lands unless they have an edge. The tax exemption is that edge."

That statement clearly sets forth a situation which should be addressed to Congress for an expression of its policy, and is not one which should be addressed to the Courts.

4. Respondent agrees with Petitioners' assertion on p.13 of the Petition that "The matter is important." Respondent sincerely believes that only by a clarification of the will of Congress as to the issue before this Court can the matter be resolved. The state of the law at this time indicates that Congress has never expressly prohibited the taxation of a possessory interest of a non-Indian on Indian land.

5. Petitioners' reason number 5 for this Court to grant the Writ [p.14 and 15] discusses the case of *Moe v. the Confederated Tribes* (1976) 96 S.Ct. 1634 and contrasts that case with the present case before this Court. Petitioners point out that this Court said that "The State's requirement that the Indian tribal seller collect a tax validly imposed on non-Indians is a minimal burden designed to avoid the likelihood that in its absence non-Indians purchasing from the tribal seller will avoid payment of a concededly lawful tax." The logical inference from that statement is that in deciding taxation issues as between Indians and public entities there can not only be burdens on the Indians, but that there can also be burdens on the public entities.

Respondent has discussed earlier in this brief "Petitioners' Prospective Land Use." It was pointed out therein that the magnitude of the enterprises contemplated by the developer was certain to create a substantial burden on the other taxpayers in San Bernardino County if the possessory interest tax was determined to be invalid.

The shifting of such a burden to the already over-burdened property taxpayers of San Bernardino County should only be done by clear expression of such an intent from Congress. If the "competitive edge" desired by the Petitioners is to be granted, it is the duty of Congress to clearly say so.

CONCLUSION

Respondent respectfully submits that the question presented is whether or not a California county, acting under state law, can validly impose a possessory interest tax upon the non-Indian lessee of Indian trust land where the tribe is subject to the Indian Reorganization Act. If the answer is that such tax is invalid a large burden will be thrust upon the other County taxpayers. If the answer is that such tax is valid, the Indians can request Congress to resolve the question. It is the opinion of the Respondent that, indeed, the question is important to both parties to this action, as well as to other Indian tribes and governmental bodies. The importance of the question and the case law supporting the validity of a possessory interest tax reinforce the statement of this Court in *Oklahoma Tax Commission v. Texas Co.* (1949) 69 S.Ct. 561; 336 U.S. 342, (365):

> "We do not imply, by this decision, that Congress does not have power to immunize these lessees from the taxes we think the Constitution permits Oklahoma to impose in the absence of such action.[37] The question whether immunity shall be extended in situations like these is essentially legislative in character."

The Petition should be denied.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

1. 24 U. S. C. § 476, Paragraph 2:

"In addition to all powers vested in any Indian tribe or tribal council by existing law, the constitution adopted by said tribe shall also vest in such tribe or its tribal council the following rights and powers: To employ legal counsel, the choice of counsel and fixing of fees to be subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Interior; to prevent the sale, disposition, lease or encumbrance of tribal lands, interests in lands, or other tribal assets without the consent of the tribe; and to negotiate with the Federal, State, and local Governments. The Secretary of the Interior shall advise such tribe or its tribal council of all appropriation estimates or Federal projects for the benefit of the tribe prior to the submission of such estimates to the Bureau of the Budget and the Congress. June 18, 1934, C. 576, § 16, 48 Stat. 987."

2. 28 U. S. C. § 1360(b):

"Nothing in this section shall authorize the alienation, encumbrance, or taxation of any real or personal property, including water rights, belonging to any Indian or any Indian tribe, band, or community that is held in trust by the United States or is subject to a restriction against alienation imposed by the United States; or shall authorize regulation of the use of such property in a manner inconsistent with any Federal treaty, agreement, or statute or with any regulation made pursuant thereto; or shall confer jurisdiction upon the State to adjudicate, in probate proceedings or otherwise, the ownership or right to possession of such property or any interest therein."

3. 18 U. S. C. § 1162(b):

"Nothing in this section shall authorize the alienation, encumbrance, or taxation of any real or personal property, including water rights, belonging to any Indian or any Indian tribe, band, or community that is held in trust by the United States or is subject to a restriction against alienation imposed by the United States; or shall authorize regulation of the use of such property in a manner inconsistent with any Federal treaty, agreement, or statute or with any regulation made pursuant thereto; or shall deprive any Indian or any Indian tribe, band, or community of any right, privilege, or immunity afforded under Federal treaty, agreement, or statute with respect to hunting, trapping, or fishing or the control, licensing, or regulation thereof."

APPENDIX B

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

THE FORT MOHAVE TRIBE, by and through its TRIBAL COUNCIL in Class Action on behalf of all members of said Tribe, *Plaintiff,* *vs.* THE COUNTY OF SAN BERNARDINO, a political subdivision of the State of California, *Defendant.*	CV 73-2609-R MEMORANDUM AND ORDER

[Filed: September 23, 1974]

Plaintiff THE FORT MOHAVE TRIBE asks this Court to re-visit its ruling in Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians v. The County of Riverside, 306 F.Supp 279 (C.C. Cal 1969) affirmed 442 F2d 1184 (9th Cir. 1971). Cert. denied, 405 U.S. 933 (1972).

In Agua Caliente (supra) the Indian lessor was relying on 28 USC §1360(b) to claim the invalidity of California possessory interest taxes as applied to lessees of Indian lands. Here plaintiff relies on the exemptions provided by the Wheeler - Howard Act (Indian Reorganization Act of 1934). 25 USC §461 et seq.

The facts here vary not one iota from those in Agua Caliente. Concededly the County of San Bernardino is collecting possessory interest taxes upon non-Indian lessees holding interests in leaseholds on Indian owned land. Only the statute claimed to create a different exemption is brought forward as the distinction. It is a distinction without a difference. To read the statutory language and to recognize the purpose of the Legislation in both cases differently is not

supportable in fact or reason. Plaintiff's encumbrance argument is answered in Agua Caliente, 442 F2d:

> "The California tax on possessory interests does not purport to tax the land as such, but rather taxes the 'full cash value' of the lessee's interest in it. Upon default in payment of the tax Indian lessor is not liable for payment of it and the Indian's title to the land is not encumbered." at page 1186 (emphasis added).

Plaintiff argues that the imposition of California's possessory interest tax involves double taxation. The position must fail for several reasons: first, the plaintiff's imposition of its own possessory interest tax suffers from the same infirmity as Agua Caliente 306 F.Supp. at page 284; second, the imposition of a tax on the same interest by the entity that leases the land (creates the interest) can hardly be distinguished from added rent; and third, plaintiff lacks standing to claim the infirmity of double taxation – that claim residing in the person being taxed.

This memorandum and order shall serve as findings of fact and conclusions of law pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 52(a).

Judgment shall be entered for the defendant.

Dated: September 20, 1974.

/s/ Manuel L. Real
MANUEL L. REAL
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

APPENDIX C

(Title of Action)
(Filed: September 28, 1976)

OPINION

Appeal From the United States District Court
for the Central District of California

Before: GOODWIN and SNEED, Circuit Judges, and KING,* District Judge.

SNEED, Circuit Judge:

This case requires us to determine whether a possessory interest tax may be imposed on non-Indian lessees of property held in trust by the United States Government for reservation Indians. Five years ago we held, in *Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians v. County of Riverside*, 442 F.2d 1184 (9th Cir. 1971), *cert. denied*, 405 U.S. 933, 92 S.Ct. 930, 30 L.Ed.2d 809 (1972), that such a tax was valid. The trial judge in the instant case found *Agua Caliente* to be controlling. We continue to support the holding of that case. We consider it proper, however, to look closely at the specific status of the Fort Mojave Indians in deciding whether the rationale of the *Agua Caliente* case should be applied to this situation. Also, it is important to review this area of the law in the light of recent Supreme Court decisions concerning taxation by state and local governments affecting Indians.

I. *Factual Situation.*

The Fort Mojave Tribe is organized under the provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, 48 Stat. 984, 25 U.S.C. §§ 461-479 (hereinafter called the "Act"), unlike the Agua

*Honorable Samuel P. King, United States District Judge for the District of Hawaii, sitting by designation.

Caliente Band. Thus the Fort Mojave Indians operate under a recognized system of self-government, with a constitution and a business charter which cannot be revoked or surrendered except by act of Congress. All reservation land is held in trust for the Fort Mojave Tribe as a whole; no individual allotments were ever made under the General Allotment Act of 1887, 25 U.S.C § 331 et seq.

The Fort Mojave Indians, as part of a plan for the economic development of their reservation, have entered into several 99-year leases with non-Indian lessees. The major development plans include a resort and housing project, as well as the possibility of building a major nuclear power plant. The reservation is located within three states, California, Nevada and Arizona. Since California is the only one of these three states that imposes a possessory interest tax,[1] development of the California section of the reservation may be slowed.[2] The Indians are opposing the California tax because they want to be able to make leasing decisions without regard to the state in which the property is located. The Indians also object to the California tax because they have their own possessory interest

[1] " 'Possessory interests' means the following:
(a) Possession of, claim to, or right to the possession of land or improvements, except when coupled with ownership of the land or improvements in the same person.
(b) Taxable improvements on tax-exempt land."

[2] The economic, as opposed to the legal, incidence of the tax sought to be imposed in this case is uncertain. Under certain assumptions with respect to the demand for the goods and services of the lessee the tax in question will fall entirely on the consumers of these goods and services. Under other assumptions with respect to such demand and with respect to the supply and demand for leasehold interests similar to that here being taxed, the tax in question will fall entirely on the lessee. Other assumptions with respect to these matters will place the burden on the Indians. Which assumptions correspond to the facts is unknown and probably not knowable. In this case, we proceed on the assumption that it is *possible* for the economic burden of the tax, in whole or in part, to fall on the Indians. We know not whether it is *probable* that it will do so.

tax. They fear that this "double taxation" will further impede development.

II. *Analytic Framework.*

[1] The Supreme Court recently has outlined the general framework by which Indian jurisdiction and taxation cases are to be analyzed. In *McClanahan v. Arizona State Tax Commission,* 411 U.S. 164, 93 S.Ct. 1257, 36 L.Ed.2d 129 (1973) the Court states that "the trend has been away from the idea of inherent Indian sovereignty as a bar to state jurisdiction and toward reliance on federal pre-emption." Although the Indian sovereignty doctrine is still relevant, "because it provides a backdrop against which the applicable treaties and federal statutes must be read," it is no longer the proper major focus of analysis. *McClanahan, supra* at 172, 93 S.Ct. at 1262. Instead we must carefully analyze the applicable federal statutes to determine whether state action has been pre-empted. If not, the state statute need only satisfy the test laid down in *Williams v. Lee,* 358 U.S. 217, 79 S.Ct. 269, 3 L.Ed.2d 251 (1958), *viz.* that it not infringe on the rights of reservation Indians to make their own laws and be ruled by them. We turn now to an analysis of the applicable statutes as illumined by recent Supreme Court decisions.

III. *Analysis of Statutes.*

A. The Indian Reorganization Act

The Indians' major argument is that their status as a self-governing tribe organized under the provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act precludes the imposition of this tax by the County of San Bernardino. Section 16 of the Act 25 U.S.C. § 476 provides that "the constitution adopted by said tribe shall also vest in such tribe or its tribal council the following rights and powers . . . to prevent the sale, disposition, lease or encumbrance of tribal lands, interests in lands, or other tribal assets without the consent of the tribe." The Indians argue that the imposition of a possessory interest tax on the lessee

encumbers their reversionary interest in the land. Alternatively, they argue that the lease itself is an "other asset" of the tribe which is encumbered if subject to taxation. We reject these arguments as going beyond the expressed Congressional intent in enacting the Act to further the achievement of economic independence for the Indians and the establishment of effective systems of tribal self-government. H.R.Rep. No. 1804, 73d Cong., 2d Sess. 6 (1934).

[2] While the imposition of a possessory interest tax on the leasehold interest will have an economic effect on the Indian lessors, and perhaps, although not certainly, will reduce the amount of rent they will be able to collect the legal incidence of the tax clearly falls on the lessee.[3] The lessor will never be personally liable for any delinquent taxes arising under this taxing statute. *Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians v. County of Riverside, supra* at 1186, Cal.Rev. & Tax.Code, § 107; *cf. Palm Springs Spa, Inc. v. County of Riverside,* 18 Cal.App.3d 372, 95 Cal.Rptr. 879 (1971). Under these circumstances, there cannot be a direct encumbrance on the lessor's reversionary interest. Similarly, the lease, apart from the lessor's reversionary interest, even if considered an asset of the tribe, is not directly encumbered simply because the amount of the tax is determined by the value of the leasehold. Whatever may be the scope of the indirect burden placed on the lessor's interest in this case, we hold that it is not sufficient to constitute an encumbrance of an "interest in land or other tribal asset."

[3] Our conclusion is buttressed by the Supreme Court's decision in *Mescalero Apache Tribe v. Jones,* 411 U.S. 145, 93 S.Ct. 1267, 36 L.Ed.2d 114 (1973). There the Court, relying on the statement that section 476 of the Act was designed to encourage tribal enterprises "to enter the white world on a footing of equal competition," 78 Cong.Rec. 11732, found that

[3] See n.2, *supra.*

traditional tax immunities had neither been expanded nor reduced by the Act. *Mescalero, supra* at 153-54 n.9, 93 S.Ct. 1267. Because the court would not imply tax exemptions absent clear statutory guidelines it upheld the imposition of a state tax on the gross receipts of a ski resort operated by the Mescaleros on land located outside the boundaries of their reservation. We follow that lead here and refuse to find that the Act created a tax exemption for non-Indian lessees of Indian land. Congress has given no clear indication that such a result was desired. When such a signal is given, the state and local governments must retreat.

B. Pub.L.No.280

[4] We turn to another relevant federal statute. California is one of the five states mandated by PL 280 to exercise both civil and criminal jurisdiction over the Indian country within their borders. Thus, both the Agua Caliente Band and the Fort Mojave Tribe are subject to California jurisdiction. Section 4(b) of PL 280, 28 U.S.C § 1360(b), specifically provides that the grant of civil jurisdiction precludes taxation of "any real or personal property . . . belonging to any Indian or any Indian tribe." We interpreted that language in *Agua Caliente* as not forbidding the imposition of a possessory interest tax on the lessee of Indian property. *Agua Caliente, supra* at 1187.

[5] This holding has been strengthened by the Supreme Court's recent holding that PL 280 left traditional tax immunities intact, despite a transfer of civil jurisdiction to certain states. *Bryan v. Itasca County,* —— U.S. ——, 96 S.Ct. 2102, 48 L.Ed.2d 863 (9th Cir. 1957). We find the Supreme Court decision in *Oklahoma Tax Commission v. Texas Co.,* 336 U.S. 342 (1949) a clear ruling that there was no tax immunity for non-Indian lessees prior to the passage of PL 280. Therefore, PL 280 provides no support for the argument that immunity should be extended to non-Indian lessees of Indian land.

[6-8] Thus, we see that neither the Act nor PL 280 evidences a Congressional intent to preclude the taxation that is being challenged here. However, we cannot say that PL 280 directly authorizes such taxation. *Bryan v. Itasca County, supra,* forecloses the possibility of such a statement by specifically holding that the PL 280 grant of civil jurisdiction only confers jurisdiction over civil causes of action involving Indians. It is not a general grant of regulatory and taxing power over Indians. This is not, however, fatal to the state's cause. Although *McClanahan, supra,* held that, in the absence of Congressional consent, states are preempted from taxing Indian reservation lands or Indian income from activities carried on within the boundaries of the reservation, the court specifically did not deal with "exertions of state sovereignty over non-Indians who undertake activity on Indian reservations." *McClanahan, supra* at 411 U.S. 168, 93 S.Ct. at 1260. When the state action is directed at non-Indians, with only indirect effects on Indians or Indian lands, it is necessary to reconcile the federal preemption rationale with the state's recognized authority to regulate its citizens. *McClanahan, supra* at 179, 93 S.Ct. 1257. Reconciliation requires that state legislation primarily directed at non-Indian lessees of Indian land be considered as not automatically preempted by the federal government in absence of specific authorization. *See Thomas v. Gay,* 169 U.S. 264, 18 S.Ct 340, 42 L.Ed. 740 (1898); *Utah & Northern R. R. v. Fisher,* 116 U.S. 28, 6 S.Ct. 246, 29 L.Ed. 542 (1885). *Cf. Bryan v. Itasca County, supra,* n.2; *Surplus Trading Co. v. Cook,* 281 U.S. 647, 50 S.Ct. 455, 74 L.Ed. 1091 (1930). *But cf. Warren Trading Post Co. v. Arizona Tax Commission,* 380 U.S. 685, 85 S.Ct. 1242, 14 L.Ed.2d 165 (1965). To permit such non-Indians to enjoy the immunity designed for Indians requires, we believe, a stronger Congressional signal than a statute which neither precludes nor authorizes the taxation in question. This does not contravene the maxim that ambiguous statutes should be construed to benefit Indians. The maxim was never intended to authorize constructions which, on their face,

benefit non-Indians handsomely and Indians only marginally, if at all.[4]

C. The Williams Test

The final hurdle facing the county is the test formulated in *Williams v. Lee, supra,* to determine whether a statute not otherwise preempted is valid. The *Williams, supra* 358 U.S. at 220, 79 S.Ct. at 271, case held that "absent governing Acts of Congress, the question has always been whether the state action infringed on the right of reservation Indians to make their own laws and be ruled by them." The Court in *McClanahan, supra* 411 U.S. at 179, 93 S.Ct. at 1266, specifically recognized that this test is principally applicable in situations invoiving non-Indians. The court stated: "In these situations, both the tribe and the State could fairly claim an interest in asserting their respective jurisdictions. The *Williams* test was designed to resolve the conflict by providing that the State could protect its interest up to the point where tribal self-government would be affected." In *Williams,* a non-Indian trader licensed by the federal government attempted to collect a debt owed him by an Indian by suing the Indian in state court. The Supreme Court found that allowing Lee to take the Indian into state court would "undermine the authority of the tribal courts over Reservation affairs and would infringe on the right of Indians to govern themselves." *Williams, supra* 358 U.S. at 220, 79 S.Ct. at 272.

[9] The interference with Indian self-government in the instant case is much less serious. No Indian or Indian land is being subjected to direct state court process. The only effect of the tax on the Indians will be the indirect one of perhaps reducing the revenues they will receive from the leases as a result of their inability to market a tax exemption. Such an indirect economic burden cannot be said to threaten the self-governing ability of the tribe.

[4] The location of ultimate economic benefits and burdens of the tax in question is quite uncertain. *See* n.2, *supra.*

[10] The assertion that "double taxation," resulting from the imposition of a tax both by the county and the tribe, impairs the ability of the tribe to levy its tax is not persuasive. There is no improper double taxation here at all, for the taxes are being imposed by two different and distinct taxing authorities. The tribe faces the same problem as other taxing agencies confront when they seek to impose a tax in an area already taxed by another entity having taxing power. We hold that the uncertain economic burden here imposed on the tribe's ability to levy a tax does not interfere with their right of self-government.

Our holding is supported by the recent Supreme Court decision in *Moe v. Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes*, ——U.S.——, 96 S.Ct. 1634, 48 L.Ed.2d 96 (1976). There the court upheld the validity of a cigarette sales tax on reservation sales to non-Indians, while invalidating the imposition of such a tax on sales to tribe members. When sales were made to non-Indians, the court found that it was "the non-Indian consumer or user who saves the tax and reaps the benefits of the tax exemption." In the instant case an analogous argument can be made. Although the location of the ultimate economic burden of the tax in this case is undertain, it is possible that the benefits of the exemption would be captured entirely by the non-Indian lessee. It is, of course, also possible that the tribe would capture the entire economic benefit of the exemption. The removal of this possibility appears to us to constitute no more than a "minimal burden" such as in *Moe* was found not to "[frustrates] tribal self-government . . . or [run] afoul of any Congressional enactment dealing with the affairs of reservation Indians." *Moe, supra* ——— U.S. at ———, 96 S.Ct. at 1646. *Moe* so held despite the fact that in that case the Indian seller did incur the legal burden of having to collect the tax. In the instant case, there is no legal burden imposed on the Indian lessor at all. In both cases, the Indians incur the possibility of an economic loss. However, the court in *Moe* did not consider that a sufficient burden to invalidate the

sales tax as applied to non-Indians making purchases on the reservation. Therefore, we do not find in the instant case a sufficient burden on the tribe's ability to govern itself to justify striking down California's possessory interest tax as applied to non-Indian lessees of Indian land.

IV. *Enforcement of the Tax as a Direct Encumbrance on the Land.*

The Indians argued both in *Agua Caliente* and the instant case that the procedures available under state law to collect the tax[5] could result in a direct cloud on their title and an unlawful encumbrance on Indian real property. The court in *Agua Caliente, supra* N.16, did not decide this question because it found that no attempt had yet been made to seize and sell any of the interests taxed and therefore the issue was not properly before the court. In the instant case the appellants give details of several situations in which notice of seizure was made and one case in which the sale was advertised before the lessee finally paid the tax. Nonetheless, there have been no completed tax sales and it is highly unlikely that any injuries to Indian rights will occur. The reasons for our confidence with respect to the future are two statutes, 25 U.S.C. § 415 and 25 U.S.C. § 476. The first requires the approval of the Secretary of the Interior of any lease of restricted Indian lands while the second explicitly gives the tribe the right to prevent the lease of tribal lands. We have no reason to believe these statutes will not be invoked to thwart tax sales contrary to the wishes of the Secretary and the Indians.

[11] These statutes, designed to protect Indians, do not render the county powerless to enforce the tax here involved against the lessee. Even if his interest is treated by the assessors as "unsecured property," *i.e.*, property insufficient to secure the payment of the tax, California law permits the seizure and sale of personal property, improvements, and possessory

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[5] Cal.Rev. & Tax.Code §§ 2951-2963 (1974).

interests of the assessee. Cal.Rev. & Tax.Code § 2951 (1974). California law also permits a direct suit to recover taxes against the owner of unsecured property against which taxes have been assessed. Cal.Rev. & Tax.Code, section 3003.[6] This case does not require us to trace out precisely the accommodations which the county and the lessee must make to protect the Indians in the event the lessee defaults in payment of the tax here being challenged. Enough has been said to indicate that we are confident these accommodations are both legal and feasible.

Therefore, the California possessory interest tax is valid as applied to the non-Indian lessees of land within the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation and the judgment of the district court is affirmed.

AFFIRMED.

[6] For a description of the techniques under California law available to the County to enforce the tax, see *Palm Springs Spa, Inc. v. County of Riverside*, 18 Cal.App.3d 372, 375-76, 95 Cal.Rptr. 879, 881 (1971).

APPENDIX D

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

THE AGUA CALIENTE BAND OF MISSION INDIANS, by and through its Tribal Council, and DORA JOYCE PRIETO, PRISCILLA GONZALES, GLORIA GILLETTEE, PATRICK PATENCIO and LAWRENCE PIERCE, Allottees, Individually and in Class Action, on behalf of All Allottees of Allotted Land on the Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians Reservation,

Appellants,

vs.

THE COUNTY OF RIVERSIDE, a political Subdivision of the State of California,

Appellee.

No. 25,298

[May 12, 1971]

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Central District of California

Before: ELY and WRIGHT, Circuit Judges, and SMITH,* District Judge.

SMITH, District Judge:

The Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians (hereafter The Band),[1] together with individual members of the Band (hereafter the Allottees) appeal from a judgment of the District

*The Honorable Russell E. Smith, Chief Judge of the United States District Court for the District of Montana, sitting by designation.

[1] See 26 Stat. 712, January 12, 1891, 73 Stat. 602, 25 U.S.C. Sections 961 - 950 (1959).

Court refusing to enjoin the imposition of the California Possessory Interest Tax[2] on the lessees of the Indian land.

The Secretary of the Interior, acting under Congressional authority,[3] allotted to the individual members of The Band and to The Band itself a total of 26,646.28 acres in the area of Palm Springs, California. These lands are interspersed among non-Indian lands in a checkerboard pattern. The legal title to them is in the United States in trust. Of these lands 1,250 acres, including eight acres owned by The Band, are under long term leases, made as authorized by 25 U.S.C Section 415 by the Allottees and The Band with the approval of the Secretary of the Interior. At the time the leases were executed all parties contemplated that the lessees would not be required to pay any taxes by reason of their use and possession of the Indian property.

Jurisdiction as to the claims of the Allottees is found in 28 U.S.C. Section 1331, and as to The Band in 28 U.S.C. Section 1331 and Section 1362, unless, as defendants claim, the court is

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[2] " 'Possessory interest' means the following:
(a) Possession of, claim to, or right to the possession of land or improvements, except when coupled with ownership of the land or improvements in the same person.
(b) Taxable improvements on tax-exempt land. Except as provided in this section, possessory interests shall not be considered as sufficient security for the payment of any taxes. Leasehold estates for the production of gas, petroleum and other hydrocarbon substances from beneath the surface of the earth, and other rights relating to such substances which constitute incorporeal hereditaments or profits a prendre, are sufficient security for the payment of taxes levied thereon. Such estates and rights shall not be classified as possessory interests, but shall be placed on the secured roll.

In the event of delinquency in the payment of any installment of taxes on such leasehold estates or rights, they shall be subject to seizure and sale in the same manner as provided for the seizure and sale of possessory interests in Sections 2914 and 2919, inclusive, at any time within three years after the delinquency. Suit may be brought against an assessee of such taxes in the event of delinquency in the payment thereof." California Revenue and Taxation Code, Section 107.

[3] See footnote 1, *supra*.

deprived of jurisdiction by 28 U.S.C., Section 1341, which reads: "The district courts shall not enjoin, suspend or restrain the assessment, levy or collection of any tax under State law where a plain, speedy and efficient remedy may be had in the courts of such State."

This section has been held to be inapplicable to cases involving taxation of instrumentalities of the United States, at least in cases where the United States is a party.[4] Indian property uniformly is said to be an instrumentality of the United States.

> "Perhaps the most frequent reason stressed by the courts for the exemption of Indian property from State taxation is the Federal Instrumentality doctrine. The doctrine in its application to Indians and Indian property is founded upon the premise that the power and duty of governing and protecting tribal Indians is primarily a Federal function, and that a State cannot impose a tax which will substantially impede or burden the functioning of the Federal Government." Federal Indian Law, Dept. of Int. 1958, page 846.[5]

At the instance of the United States, as trustee, State laws taxing Indian property may be contested in the Federal District Court. An Indian, as the beneficial owner of lands held by the United States in trust has a right acting independently of the

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[4] Department of Employment, et al. v. United States, et al., 385 U.S. 355 (1966), United States v. Livingston, 179 F.Supp. 9 (E.D.S.C. 1959), affirmed without opinion 364 U.S. 281 (1960). It is to be noted that in one of these cases a public corporation was a co-plaintiff with the United States, and that in the other a private corporation was a co-plaintiff with the United States.

[5] Cited in support: United States v. Rickert, 188 U.S. 432 (1903); United States v. Pearson, 231 Fed. 270 (1916); Dewey County, S.D. v. United States, 26 F.2d 434 (1928), *cert. den.* 278 U.S. 649 (1928); United States v. Thurston County, 143 Fed. 287 (1906); United States v. Wright, 53 F.2d 300 (1931), *cert. den.* 285 U.S. 530; Morrow v. United States, 243 Fed. 854 (1917).

United States to sue to protect his property interests.[6] The reasons given in *United States v. Livingston, supra,* for exempting instrumentalities of the United States from the operation of 28 U.S.C. Section 1341 are no less cogent when the right to the exemption is asserted by one who properly could be a co-plaintiff with the United States. We conclude that the District Court did have jurisdiction.

The California tax on possessory interests does not purport to tax the land as such, but rather taxes the "full cash value" of the lessee's interest in it.[7] Upon default in payment of the tax the Indian lessor is not liable for payment of it and the Indian's title to the land is not encumbered.[8]

A substantial amount of evidence was received bearing upon the economic effects of the tax upon the Indian. We conclude from it what we would conclude without it, that it, a lessee can afford to pay more rent if he is not required to pay a possessory interest tax. If an Indian's land is not subject to that tax he enjoys a better bargaining position than he otherwise would, and hence that the tax has an adverse economic effect upon him.

States may not without the consent of Congress tax the property of the United States,[9] nor may they tax instrumentalities of the United States.[10]

If the Indian as a beneficial owner of the land, the legal title to which is in the United States, is entitled to no more protection than the United States itself would enjoy, absent a congressional action forbidding the tax, then it is clear that the tax here imposed is valid. In *United States v. City of Detroit, supra,* (fn. 9) it was held that a tax similar to the California

[6] Poafpybitty v. Skelly Oil Co., 390 U.S. 365 (1968).

[7] County of Riverside v. Palm-Ramon Development Co., 63 Cal. 2d 534, 47 Cal. Rptr. 377, 407 P.2d 289 (1965).

[8] Cal.Rev. and Taxation Code, Sections 2914 - 2919, 3003, 3101 - 3107.

[9] United States v. City of Detroit, 355 U.S. 466 (1958).

[10] See cases cited in footnotes 4 and 5.

Possessory Interest tax could be levied upon a lessee holding land under a lease from the federal government even though the burden of the tax fell directly upon the United States. If it was not clear before, it is clear since *United States v. City of Detroit, supra,* that "the imposition of an increased financial burden on the Government does not, by itself, vitiate a state tax" and that the tax imposed upon the use of property is something distinct from a tax imposed upon the property itself. We conclude from this that the tax here is properly imposed unless it can be said that the legislation dealing with Indians and Indian lands demonstrates a congressional purpose to forbid the imposition of it.

Here as in *United States v. City of Detroit, supra,* there is no statute which expressly forbids the imposition of a state use tax. The statutory law mentioning the taxation of these lands is found in an equalization act[11] and in a statute granting some measure of regulatory power to local governments.[12] If, as was

[11] Public Law 86-339, Sept. 21, 1959, 73 Stat. 602, Sec. 5.

"(a) The right to an equalization allotment or to a cash payment in lieu thereof pursuant to section 3, subsection (d), of this Act, shall be transferable by will or descent in the same manner as are trust payments under existing law and shall not be subject to State or Federal inheritance, estate, legacy, or succession taxes.

"(b) A cash payment made in lieu of an equalization allotment pursuant to section 3, subsection (d) of this Act shall not be regarded as income or capital gain for purposes of Federal or State income taxation and shall not, as long as it remains in the form of cash or a bank deposit in the ownership of the allottee, be subject to taxation as personal property."

[12] 28 U.S.C. Section 1360. "(b) Nothing in this section (the one granting the regulatory power) shall authorize the alienation, encumbrance, or taxation of any real or personal property, including water rights, belonging to any Indian or any Indian tribe, band, or community that is held in trust by the United States or is subject to a restriction against alienation imposed by the United States; or shall authorize regulation of the use of such property in a manner inconsistent with any Federal treaty, agreement, or statute or with any regulation made pursuant thereto; or shall confer jurisdiction upon the State to adjudicate, in probate proceedings or otherwise, the ownership or right to possession of such property or any interest therein."

said in *United States v. City of Detroit, supra,* a tax upon the use of property is not a tax upon the property itself, then there is nothing in these statutes which expressly forbids the tax here imposed.

It remains however to determine whether from other legislation dealing with Indians and Indian land a purpose to exempt these allotments from the kind of a tax herein imposed may be found. The law initially authorizing the allotments[13] provides that the land shall be held in trust for the "sole use and benefit" of The Band or Allottees and that at the expiration of the trust period the land shall be transferred "free of all charge and encumbrance whatsoever." This language is identical with the language used in the general allotment Act[14] and in *Oklahoma Tax Commission v. Texas Company,* 336 U.S. 342 (1949) the Supreme Court refused to imply a tax exemption on the basis of that language. The general rule that tax exemptions are not granted by implication is applicable to taxing acts affecting Indians as it is to all others.[15]

The position urged by the Indians here was fully supported by *Gillespie v. Oklahoma,* 257 U.S. 501 (1922) wherein Mr. Justice Holmes said "A tax on the leases was a tax upon the power to make them and could be used to destroy the power to make them" and "the same considerations that invalidate a tax upon the leases invalidate a tax upon the profit of the leases, and stopping short of theoretical possibilities, a tax upon such profits is a direct hamper upon the effort of the United States to make the best terms that it can for its wards." That position however was specifically rejected in *Oklahoma v. Texas Company, supra,* and it is now untenable.

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[13] 26 Stat. 712 (1891).

[14] 25 U.S.C. Section 348.

[15] Oklahoma Tax Commission v. United States, 319 U.S. 598 (1943). Squire v. Capoeman, 351 U.S. 1 (1956) may point to, although it does not express, a different rule where the taxing power of the United States comes in conflict with the interest of the ward.

Appellants and *amicus curiae* press upon us the economic plight of the Indians and persuasively attack the concept that a tax upon the use of a thing is not a tax upon the thing itself, but as we see it these arguments are foreclosed by the decisions cited.[16]

The judgment appealed from is affirmed.

ELY, Circuit Judge (Dissenting):

I respectfully dissent. The obligation of the federal government to its Indian wards, probably born of a collective national guilt, runs deep. It is federal policy, undeniable, if belated, that the Indian has a special status in our Country and that he is justly entitled to very special protection. I cannot join in stripping such a protection from the Agua Caliente Band in the face of the overwhelming evidence that the tax in question amounts, in its effect, to taxation of the full value of Indian trust lands.

It is conceded by all concerned that were Riverside County's possessory interest tax imposed directly on the Indian lands, it would be unlawful. My Brothers, however, feel constrained by *United States v. Detroit,* 355 U.S. 466, 2 L Ed. 2d 424, 78 S. Ct. 474 (1958), to hold that "the tax imposed upon the use of property is something distinct from a tax imposed upon the property itself." They conclude the tax to have been validly imposed absent legislative immunization. They further rely upon *Oklahoma Tax Comm'n v. Texas Co.,* 336 U.S. 342, 93 L. Ed. 721, 69 S. Ct. 561 (1949), to conclude that no such legislative immunization may be implied. I strongly disagree with both conclusions.

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[16] California has made no attempt to seize and sell the interest of the lessees in any of the property involved in this action, and it is unnecessary here to touch upon the problem which would be created were the State of California, by some process of seizure and sale, to endeavor to substitute in an Indian lease a new lessee in the absence of the consent of the Indians and of the Secretary.

Detroit simply expressed the view, with which I have no disagreement, that the doctrine of intergovernmental immunity does not preclude state taxation of an entity *solely* because the burden of such taxation eventually falls on the federal government. If, however, an important federal policy conflicts with the goal of effective implementation of the state taxing power, I should think that the Supremacy Clause demands that the extent to which a state tax burdens the federal policy be an important factor in determining the validity of the tax. There was no such conflict in *Detroit*. Here, I submit, the conflict is unmistakable, and burden onerous.

Moreover, even if the majority has correctly interpreted *Detroit*, the local tax here involved was illegal. The Agua Caliente lands were given "for the sole use and benefit" of the Band, to be conveyed at the end of the trust period "free of all charge or encumbrance whatsoever." The land involved in *Oklahoma Tax Comm'n* was allotted pursuant to a statute containing the same language, and my Brothers construe the opinion in that case as a refusal to imply a tax exemption from the language. But this, I submit, is an incorrect reading of that case. The court in *Oklahoma Tax Comm'n* was addressing itself primarily to the constitutional status of lessees of government - owned lands, whether Indian trust or otherwise. The lessees in that case sought exemption as federal instrumentalities. "The respondents are 'private persons' who seek immunity 'for their property or gains because they are engaged in operations under a government contract or lease.' " 336 U.S. at 363. Since the Indian lessors bore no tax burden, direct or indirect, the lessees were procluded from urging a derivative immunity from the Indian grant. "These cases present no question concerning the immunity of the Indian lands themselves from state taxation. *There is no possibility that ultimate liability for the taxes may fall upon the owner of the land.*" 336 U.S. at 353 (emphasis supplied). The statutory implication which was rejected in that case was not urged from the Indian grant, but from the fact of the lease itself. No derivative Indian rights were asserted by the

non-Indian lessees, and no Indian was a party to the action. Indeed, the crucial language of the statute was not discussed, or even mentioned!

Underscoring the limited relevance of *Oklahoma Tax Comm'n* is *Squire v. Capoeman*, 351 U.S. 1, 100 L. Ed. 883, 76 S. Ct. 611 (1956). There, the Supreme Court, fulfilling a "clear 'duty to secure to the Indians all that by any fair construction of treaty or statute can be held to have been understood by them or intended by Congress[,] Minnesota v. Hitchcock, 185 U.S. 373, 402 (1902),' " actually did construe the "charge or encumbrance" language alleged to have been at issue in *Oklahoma Tax Comm'n*. Without reference to the *Oklahoma* case, the language was construed to include taxation.

The majority's footnote 15 gives inadequate expression to the force of *Squire*. The case did not turn on the difference between state and federal taxation of Indian trust lands. Rather, the case stands for the proposition that the federal policy of protecting Indian wards is superior even to the need to collect revenue for the maintenance of the federal government itself. Surely, we should afford no less protection when the interest of the Indian ward is in conflice with an interest of a State. Some of the States were likely no less responsible than the Nation for alleged depredations of Indian property sometimes said to have caused the creation of federal trust status in the first instance. *Cf.* Note, 42 S.Cal L. Rev. 101, 110 n.42. (1969).

I would reverse.